



# The MILITARY-MEDIA RELATIONSHIP

## A Dysfunctional Marriage?

Thom Shanker and  
Major General Mark Hertling, U.S. Army

*Thom Shanker, a Pentagon correspondent for The New York Times, has served as a reporter in a variety of conflicts and has made numerous reporting trips to Iraq, embedded in corps, division, and down to small-unit levels. Major General Mark Hertling recently returned from his third tour of duty in Iraq (the first during Desert Storm, the second as a deputy commander in Baghdad during Operation Iraqi Freedom, and the third as commander of 1st Armored Division and Multinational Division-North).*

*After this most recent deployment, Hertling convened an after-action review conference in Garmisch, Germany, and invited Shanker to attend. During the conference, the two had an opportunity to continue their ongoing dialogue on military-media relations. Their conversation shows the relationship becoming increasingly complicated, as these two men from different professions debated the contentiousness—and the common ground—that exists between the military and the media during this time of conflict and expansive news coverage.*

**Hertling:** I sure am glad your editors allowed you to attend this conference, given the economic pressures throughout your industry. It seems to me that these are exactly the kind of forums we need to help us understand each other, since we're certainly going to have a working relationship whether we want to or not.

**Shanker:** About that. You know, it's always seemed to me that the relationship between the military and the media is like a marriage. It's a dysfunctional marriage at times—to be sure—but we stay together for the kids. For you, the Soldiers are your "children," and you serve them as their commander. For me, my dependents are my readers—the citizens of this Nation who offer up ample portions of the national treasury and, even more valuable, their sons, daughters, siblings, and spouses for your missions. They deserve to know what is going on within the military and in the formulation of security policy, especially in a time of two wars.

**Hertling:** I'd agree—to a degree. You certainly have the requirement, both from your professional ethic and what's in our Constitution regarding freedom of the press, to inform our citizens. The public has the right to know what's going on as the military fights and executes policy. But I'd also suggest that the military's responsibility is to more than the servicemen

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PHOTO: *Washington Post* reporter Kristin Henderson, left, takes photos alongside U.S. Marine combat correspondent CPL James Mercure in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, 27 October 2008. (U.S. Marine Corps, LCPL Chad J. Pulliam)

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and women we lead . . . We also have the requirement to protect and defend our Constitution and our Nation's ideals and values. That's in our oath, and it's an important facet of who we are and how we act. So while we want Americans to be informed on what's going on, we're also focused on them understanding the intricacies of our "fights." What we do—and how it is perceived—is so important to our Nation. For that reason, it's also important to our young lieutenants and sergeants who are doing the tough work on the ground . . . and those are the ones that also sometimes deal with the media. We're all excessively passionate about how we are perceived by those we serve—especially when lives are on the line. Sometimes that blinds us. But mostly, we have a desire to ensure when journalists report what we're doing, they get the intricacies right for the American people.

And there's an even greater challenge today, because what is reported in an American newspaper or what airs on CNN or Fox will often find its way into the media in other parts of the world. More impetus to get it "right" for the audience, because who we are and how we are viewed by our adversaries is also important.

Oh, and as for the dysfunctional marriage analogy . . . it certainly sometimes feels that way. But could it be our relationship becomes dysfunctional due to a lack of trust and communication?

**Shanker:** Could be. There is an old line you've heard before: Truth is the first casualty of war. But in the information age, the first casualty of war is trust—trust between those who fight the wars and those whose job it is to report them. Military officers have to build trust now, in any way possible across a variety of venues for interaction, so that when things go bad, as they always do, that reservoir of trust is there to explain and understand. And remember, critical assessments are not a sign of disrespect.

There is another old line for reporters: You go off to cover war, but it covers you. I would simply add to that: You can never, ever completely wash it off. And you spoke about career military personnel being passionate—that applies to those in both our professions. But you know that.

**Hertling:** Your point about building trust is spot on . . . all the time. I've found that to be at the heart of what makes us function so well as teams within our military. Units won't get anything done

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without mutual trust. But journalists have just as much responsibility in building that trust with the military. Unfortunately, all of us wearing the uniform have been "burned" by a report or a reporter at one time or another and that certainly influences any relationship.

I've seen us treat reporters like our own . . . for short periods of time, when they're embedded or when we establish a personal relationship and ensure they have access. But in the military, we build trust from being with people, from sharing the same kind of environment, and from having the same kinds of values . . . all the time. We give journalists complete access and openness only when we know that trust exists. It's tough to build trust—and give the continuous information that allows the "critical assessment" that you mentioned—when reporters are constantly moving in and out of our area, or when we have to train those to see what they are looking at who have never been in a war zone before. And it's harder to rebuild trust once it's been lost with an individual. There were times in Iraq when I had journalists who were there for months or even years and who truly understood what was happening . . . but there were other journalists who were continuously coming in and out of theater thinking they were experts; or worse, there were those who were there for the first time who decided they already knew more than they did. And there were some that just felt they had to make an immediate impression on the editors or bureau

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chief with the “whatta story.” Now, none of these journalists are bad people—and we certainly have the same kind of personalities in the military—but when they wield a pen or a video camera they have a mouthpiece that can negatively affect—in a short period—things that have taken months to turn positive. In complex counterinsurgency environments, this can be catastrophic. That’s what some of our younger officers and service members sometimes see when they deal with the media.

And by the way, we have old adages, too. I always try and remember the one that says a person is usually at a disadvantage when he or she disagrees with someone who buys ink by the barrel.

**Shanker:** I want to drill down on the point you made regarding embeds. For the war in Iraq, we’d both agree, embeds were a success. Since the end of the draft, newsrooms were no longer filled with veterans of military service. Our cultures were deeply divided. But now, hundreds if not thousands of reporters are salted across the media landscape who have shared tents, MREs—and battlefield risks—with your troops. Understanding on both sides increased.

But Iraq also was likely the end of the road for large-scale embeds. It is quite possible that the successful program for Iraq was a one-off deal. It was a large ground campaign that provided numerous opportunities for embedded media. As we look to possible contingencies for the future, those embed opportunities seem to be to be pretty scarce: North Korea? Taiwan Straits? Upheaval in Pakistan? Countering Iran’s nuclear ambitions? We may not be marching off to war together next time.

**Hertling:** I’m not sure. Since embeds came to be, I’ve come to know literally hundreds of reporters. And I’ve mentally placed them in several categories on my own “trust spectrum”: There are those I’d want with me when the going gets tough and complicated because they are true professionals who do the kind of critical analysis and quality reporting you talked about earlier. But there are also those who are predisposed to a certain view and who don’t apply the kind of rigor we in the military think they need to truly and properly inform the American public. And there are a few that just flat-out have an agenda because they want to

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make a name for themselves or they want to please their editors or bureau chiefs with the least amount of work and the most amount of bombast possible. All professions have these kinds of personalities and characters, but journalists are so critical because of their ability to influence the public.

I know that whatever kind of conflict I’m involved with “next time,” I’ll want an embed or two with me because of the demands associated with the information dynamic. I truly believe—as you do—that the American people have the right to know what we’re doing.

**Shanker:** Regardless of the fire next time, I’m sure you’ll agree that the military must understand that it has surrendered its historic monopoly over control of the battle space.

For the future, wherever you operate, reporters will probably be there first. American reporters were traveling with Northern Alliance fighters in Afghanistan before the first special forces ODA [operational detachment-alpha, or “A-team”] put boots on the ground; Baghdad was swarming with press before the first J-DAMs and cruise missiles found their targets.

And you have surrendered your monopoly over communications from the battle space, too. As recently as Vietnam, reporters had to return to Saigon to file. When I was first posted to Moscow in the mid-1980s, the Soviet customs authority—read that as KGB—confiscated my computer modem as an “encryption device,” and I was forced to file by punching telex tape that could be intercepted and read by Soviet intelligence. By the time I got to Bosnia in 1992, I could file from the middle of an artillery duel in Tuzla by satellite, although the transmitter was about the size of a suitcase. Today—in Iraq and

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Afghanistan—TV reporters file sparkling video and use old-fashioned Gutenberg print type; reporters have satellite Internet providers smaller than a laptop, real-time, no censorship.

**Hertling:** All that's true. We're sharing the area of operation with journalists, non-governmental officials, interagency officials, and a host of others. And my Soldiers and I have been amazed at reporters' ability to file quickly from the most austere conditions. But if I were a reporter wanting to give the American public information about military activities, I would at least want it informed by those who are considered experts in the field... the military. The reporters you mention who were in Baghdad, or those with the Northern Alliance, certainly knew their piece of the environment, but they probably only knew a part of the story because of their sources. They may not have known the tactical plans or operational context or the strategic outcomes that the executors were attempting to achieve. Being with a 12-man ODA team is pretty cool and heady, but it doesn't qualify an assessment on the operational end state.

For example, I often had to field questions from reporters who had been with a squad in Baquba who used their limited experience in one part of my area to quiz me on battalion operations in Mosul, a radically different part of our area. It's tough judging the whole from a part. And again, what they might be reporting to the American people will soon end up on foreign websites, and will influence our adversaries. That's where the line between public affairs and information operations becomes a bit blurry.

**Shanker:** We could spend all day debating the virtual battle space and the marketplace of ideas. But when it comes to the debate over how to divide responsibility between public affairs and information operations, the press has not been as precise as it should in helping our readers understand those differences, as well as the differences in the tools of battlefield deception and tactical psychological operations versus strategic communications.

But I know one thing for certain: When I hear that the military assesses its theater communications strategies in units called "strategic effects," I know something may not be right. This is not a military occupational specialty, like artillery.

You can't fire a message downrange and measure its effects against your enemy the way you conduct

bomb-damage assessment. Ideas are not electrons that you can positively charge, and then measure the illuminating effect. I have sat with strategic effects officers who counted the number of so-called "positive" stories they have placed in Iraqi media as if that tally meant anything in the real world where content is suspect—and the supplier of that content even more so.

I spent five years in Moscow—although my wife marked the time as five *winters*—and so I have learned how citizens of a dictatorship, or of a former dictatorship like in Iraq today, distrust their local media. These tallies of so-called "positive" stories in Iraq are meaningless in the real world.

The bottom line: You can't spread democratic values through means that are undemocratic. And if there are cases where, perhaps, such propaganda or deception is required to reach a specific tactical end endorsed by senior leaders, then it should be done by those people who operate under Title 50—and not those in uniform who operate under Title 10. In a world linked by Internet and satellite TV, tactical information operations downrange, even in enemy territory, will play to folks in Peoria in a few hours.

**Hertling:** I admit, we're wrestling with all this... how to place metrics on strategic effects. We're finding it's like nailing Jello to a wall. There are some studies done that prove there is no silver bullet in this arena, and the quantification of "messaging" is certainly not a refined science. But the military is a culture where metrics are important, and there are some well-meaning individuals in our ranks who need a little more experience in strategic communication. Fact is—and we in the military need to focus on this critical point—while information and public affairs are still called "non-lethal fires," we usually can't ensure they have timely or reliable effects.

You know, the chairman of the joint chiefs recently said that information is the critical realm

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of the future battlefield. Military leaders try to control all aspects of every fight, but the fact is, a message-centric battlefield is hardly manageable because it changes and the messages that are sent are so unreliable to read in the receiver.

But this gets back to the point about our relationship, because as we—military and media—interact, our responsibility remains giving the most informed, best analyzed, and factual information to the public. That’s tough for us, because our profession has so many complications.

What kind of “fixes” do you think are appropriate to help our relationship improve and help our marriage get beyond dysfunctional?

**Shanker:** I can offer some rules of the road for this military-media relationship. Maximum disclosure with minimum delay. When a question is asked, there are only three allowable answers: the truth, “I know but I can’t tell you due to classification,” and “I don’t know, but let me see what I can find out.” If you are in the public affairs community, do not ever lie. Or, as a very smart captain once told me: Once something bad has happened, you can never change that. All you have control over is how the public learns about it.

Ever since the invasion of Iraq, senior officers like to speak of “the speed of war.” And that speed is only increasing. Yet your system for reporting information up the chain of command for release to the media is shackled by the rusty chains of the industrial age. I have been with your forces in contact with the enemy. I know that when you cover a war it covers you, and completely, and so I cannot expect a new directive for a squad leader to break contact just to file a press release. And I know to distrust first reports.

Even so, when it takes 8, 12, 16, or 20 hours for the military command or the Pentagon to comment—perhaps clarify, perhaps correct—reports from downrange on an incident that was broadcast live over satellite TV—well, you have surrendered several news cycles before your version of events is laid before the unblinking judgment of public opinion. That time can never be recovered.



DOD, Mass Comm. Specialist 1st Class Chad J. McNeeley

**U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates and U.S. Navy Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, address the media during a press conference at the Pentagon, 18 June 2009.**

Those first impressions may never change. The adversary responds faster with its statements, whether truth or falsehood. Absent your timely response—you lose.

**Hertling:** You raise some interesting points. I’ll take a few for comment.

First, you’ve only given me three allowable answers for any question, but I would contend there needs to be many, many more. I certainly agree with you on always telling the truth, but often the truth is extremely complicated and reporters are usually looking for quick and easy answers that can be either written succinctly or pushed into a video sound bite. In war—as old Carl Clausewitz said—even the simplest things are difficult. Those difficulties are not always understood immediately, and even if they are, they are hard to explain. If a reporter is willing to spend the time and discuss the implications of an event, most of us in the military are willing to expand on the story . . . if we have time. In combat, time is a scarce resource.

Along with this, I’ve seen an inherent lack of trust when senior military leaders attempt to provide answers to the press; I always get the impression you think we’re trying to “spin” you. I know that’s sometimes the case, but I also know that many reporters are always looking for the “gotcha” moment when they can spin a story to cause more

conflict. So speaking the truth—without all its complications—is sometimes something a soldier doesn't have time for, but reporters on deadline often discount.

Second, the military maxim of “never believe a first report” is one that—with age and experience—I put increasing stock in. Military commanders with any savvy will always allow even the most seemingly disastrous event to percolate . . . because we know from experience that there is usually something more to the report. But the reporters seem to have a need for instantaneous gratification . . . especially in this age of the 24/7 news cycle. So how do we fix this problem? Earned trust—on both sides—may be the only solution.

You are absolutely right on the increasing ferocity and tempo of combat . . . the “speed of war” as our special operations brothers say. But you make a good point in that “first impressions never change.” To you, that means it's imperative to get the first report out as fast as possible. To us, that means getting whatever report to the press as accurate and informative as possible. Truthfully, I've been in organizations that have taken an inordinately long time to get our press releases out, and on several occasions it hurt the cause and frustrated me as a commander. But no matter how hard we try, I don't ever think we will get those releases to you as fast as you would like them. We need to continue to address this in our relationship.

Finally, our adversaries do often get information to the press, the TV, the Internet faster than we do. That's because we have an enemy that is preplanning and entrapping, not “responding.” Information is the current coin of the realm in the extremist war we're fighting, and much of the information our enemies give is designed before the event occurs, as part of an information campaign. But as you know, there's a difference between info ops and public affairs. We have to be truthful when we talk to the press; our enemies do not.

**Shanker:** I know that men and women in uniform justifiably rankle when media describe the armed services as a monolith, as if there is some “capital M” military. Of course, there are different branches and, within each, different occupational specialties and so on. So tell me, please: Why do so many in the military criticize my profession as if there is a news monolith, a “capital M” media?

We are different. There is the big-time, mainstream media with vast resources to cover this building, to maintain large staffs in such places as Baghdad and Kabul, and to publish numerous stories every day on those missions. There are small-town outlets that depend on the wire services for their information from the front. Some reporters have studied the military, some have not. TV has different needs. There is foreign media, and divided again between reporters from allies and those from more, shall we say, hostile capitals. Then there are the blogs, where increasingly persuasive reporters show up for work at their kitchen tables in the standard uniform: T-shirt and boxer shorts.

Just as you study an adversary, you must tell your subordinates in the field that they must strive to understand how different are the reporters in contact with you. And just as you conduct disciplined planning for possible contingencies, with branches and sequels for potential outcomes, you are not completing the planning process without doing the same for your media engagement.

**Hertling:** As I became more experienced with the media, this is the one area that I realized needs Ph.D.-level skills. Not all reporters—or outlets—are created equal, and not all of you want the same kind of care and feeding. I didn't learn that until I was a brigadier general, as prior to that I was lumping all of you into one amorphous group. Our



U.S. Air Force, SSGT Samuel Morse

**A video camera captures a briefing given by U.S. Air Force BG Mike Holmes, 5 January 2009, during media day at Bagram Air Field, Afghanistan. After his briefing on close air support, reporters asked for details on Air Force efforts to minimize civilian casualties.**

younger leaders are learning these kinds of intricacies in combat earlier . . . placing the right type of media at the right places to get the right access at the right time. But our young lieutenants or sergeants who haven't yet learned the difference between an AP stringer and a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist are the same as some of the cub reporters that have come into my ops centers who don't know the difference between a tank and an artillery piece. We can all take some friendly advice from the other side, but this is sometimes as difficult as laser brain surgery to folks on your side and mine.

For example, even as an older brigadier general, I had an epiphany during a battle in 2003 in Iraq. We had a very complicated operation which needed finesse, but we also needed to send a message to the enemy that we would be unrelenting and lethal. We had a few options as to where we wanted to locate and embed the dozens of media that we shared information with. Should they go with a unit that was doing a tank thunder run, or with an infantry unit that would see some tense negotiations and nuanced battlefield operations. Our final decision? Place the TV journalists with the units that would be getting the exciting film footage with tough combat, and place the print journalist (one from your paper) with the unit that would require the deeper analysis. It was masterful, everyone was initially happy as they pleased their editors and bureau chiefs, and we looked smarter than we were! But even that changed when the reports were filed, and each journalist thought the other side of the grass was greener and wanted us to switch them to their competitors' locations.

**Shanker:** Newspapers, television, and radio remain your most vital means of remaining connected to the rest of American society. This is especially important because the default mode of our democracy is peace, and it is hard to keep a nation on war footing. Constant hostilities are not part of our national DNA, and for that we should be proud. But I know that many of you feel uncomfortable with the bumper sticker that America is a nation at war—while it's really just a military at war, along with the intelligence community. It is no wonder the military is becoming self-regenerating: recruits and new officers are often the offspring of Soldiers and officers. The American armed forces risk becoming the Prussian military of the 21st century.

***But I know that many of you feel uncomfortable with the bumper sticker that America is a nation at war—while it's really just a military at war, along with the intelligence community.***

Okay. That's on the home front. And downrange, reporters are as much a part of the battlefield as weather and terrain. You would never abandon the battlefield because of inclement weather. You would never surrender to difficult terrain. So why on earth would you choose not to engage with us?

I am a reporter. I look for narratives that will attract readers and inform them. If a military officer talks to reporters, I can't guarantee your story will be told the way you want it. But if you don't speak with reporters, I can guarantee your side of the story may not be told at all. Or it may be told by others who spend little time trying to understand what you do and cannot appreciate your interests at all.

**Hertling:** You got me on all these points! As a senior commander, I've learned how important it is to establish relationships, forge the trust, and allow access (when appropriate and *earned!*) with those of the journalistic profession.

But while you're asking us to do all these things, there are a few things reporters can do, too. The military prides itself on its schools and training facilities. We continuously polish our skills, and self-critique our actions, even to the point of "scab-picking" as we try to get better. And we define ourselves by our code of ethics and our values. Professionals are defined by these things. In my discussions with several journalists, they all find fault with editors, chiefs, and fellow reporters for not policing themselves and improving. Journalists need time to train, expand their professional view, self-critique, and develop a precise code of ethics. It works for the professional military, for lawyers, for doctors, and for the ministry. It seems it might also work for members of the fourth estate.

**Shanker:** One final thought from my side. Prior to the Iraq invasion, I was at Fort Benning and spoke with Lieutenant General Hal Moore, who commanded the first major ground engagement in



Vietnam, the battle at Ia Drang in November 1965. His book became a movie: *We Were Soldiers Once... and Young*. He had mutually beneficial relationships with correspondents in a war for which that was not the norm. I asked his secret.

General Moore said: "I told reporters 'Don't get in the way. And don't give up my plans.' And I told my troops, 'Talk from your level—don't speak for the highers. And tell the truth.'" He knew that he was the most important public affairs officer in the entire unit. He sets commander's intent, from the top.

**Hertling:** Good advice. General Moore also had the distinct advantage of having Joe Galloway as his "marriage partner." I tell all my subordinate commanders that *they* are their unit's public affairs officer. Getting accurate information to the people who are watching is a critical part of our 21st-century battlefield dynamics, and that's why our relationships with the press need to be strong.

**Shanker:** As I said at the beginning: The military-media relationship is like a marriage. But perhaps my awful metaphor is out of order. It is most important of all for us to remain engaged. **MR**

## CAC COMMANDING GENERAL'S 2009 WRITING COMPETITION ON INFORMATION

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